

[Open letter, Koch concerns]

## Open Letter to the John Jay College Community, 10/09/17

Dating back to the end of 2015 several faculty members have sought to learn from former President Travis, and more recently President Mason, the circumstances and nature of the Koch Foundation(s) presence at our college. On Friday October 6, 2017 President Mason met with Profs Matthew Johnson, Gerry Markowitz, and Phil Yanos representing a group of about a dozen members of the faculty and college community. The purpose of our meeting with President Mason was to express our concerns about the Koch influence/presence/collaboration with our college and to propose some type of a process for the college community to be consulted and involved in evaluating donor funding and relations. We look forward to further discussions with President Mason and with the entire college community.

At present there are 3 identifiable concerns we have about the Koch presence at our proud public college. These concerns are delineated below.

1. There is increasing recognition that environmental crimes are human rights violations with real devastating human consequences. To provide a human face to Koch Industries environmental crime, Mayer (2016b) reports Danielle Smalley & Jason Stones were killed when a leaking Koch pipeline exploded in a fireball destroying their vehicle. Upon review, the National Transportation Safety Board determined the Koch Pipeline Company knew the pipeline was corroded but had failed to make the proper repairs nor notify local families of the danger.

Based on Environmental Protection Agency data, Koch Industries is one of only 3 companies in the top 30 for air, water, and climate pollution (Mayer, 2016a). In 2000, Koch Industries faced a 97-count criminal indictment for covering up leaks of metric tons of dangerous benzene gas. They subsequently pled guilty to one felony charge of "concealment of information". It was reported the courageous Koch employee (Salley Barnes-Soliz) who blew the whistle on the corporate practice was subjected to retaliation. We have serious concerns with the college partnering with such an organization.

2. Koch Industries and various enterprises have exhibited a hostility to scientific inquiry. This has been well documented in several sources -

Union of Concerned Scientists: [http://www.ucsusa.org/global\\_warming/solutions/fight-misinformation/global-warming-skeptic.html#.WdIBXGhSw2w](http://www.ucsusa.org/global_warming/solutions/fight-misinformation/global-warming-skeptic.html#.WdIBXGhSw2w)

Greenpeace: <http://www.greenpeace.org/usa/global-warming/climate-deniers/koch-industries/>

Frontline: <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/article/climate-change-skeptic-group-seeks-to-influence-200000-teachers/>

- and illustrated most clearly in their funding of 'climate change denier research' (also see Otto, 2016). The Koch fortunes were made in fossil fuels and it was widely known that fossil fuel production and use has adverse effects on our home planet and human life as we know it. The Kochs seek to confuse the public (and naïve politicians looking for a handout) about scientific findings that are threatening to their corporate profits. However, scientific inquiry and research are at the core of the mission of our proud public college. Partnering with an organization with a demonstrated hostility toward scientific findings would be contrary our identity and goals.

3. The aims and objectives of Koch Industries and Foundations targeted donations is to pursue particular so-called 'free market' policy objectives that are friendly to their financial interests. That is, to lower corporate taxes and decrease regulation of private industry so there are increased obstacles to ensuring corporate liability and prosecuting corporate criminal activity. Quoting from the Faculty Senate report from Wake Forest University (Wake Forest Report, 2017) - "The Charles Koch Foundation stated aims in leveraging higher education are to convert students to their free market ideology, feed the pipeline to their think tanks and institutes, and through their network of scholars, impact state and local policy." We think the type of inquiry taken by faculty at Wake Forest and other colleges is warranted at our college. We are not concerned about monitoring individual faculty members' grant funding but are concerned where the college itself is embracing particular funders whose policy objectives contribute to a decrease in public funding sources for higher education and independent research.

The encroachment of Koch influence at our college is a crisis. However, this crisis provides our college community an opportunity to educate and learn. Students need to know about conflicting interests in a diverse society. They need to critically examine slogans like 'free market' and the other so-called 'freedoms' heralded by Koch and Libertarians. Students, faculty, and college staff need to be knowledgeable about 'philanthropic' agendas and aims, and recognize these issues are being debated at many universities across the US. We are in favor of a process where the entire college community is engaged and consulted regarding these developments. We hope this statement is effective in introducing our concerns to the college community.

#### References:

- Mayer, J. (2016a) Do the Koch Brothers Care About You? *The New Yorker*, 1/25/16, 38-47.  
 Mayer, J. (2016b) *Dark Money: The Hidden History of the Billionaires Behind the Rise of the Radical Right*. New York, NY: Penguin.  
 Otto, S. (2016). *The war on science: Who's waging it, why it matters, what we can do about it*. Minneapolis, MN: Milkweed.  
 Wake Forest Report (2017) Report of the Ad Hoc Committee of the Senate of Wake Forest University on the Eudaimonia Institute, March 15, 2017.

Respectfully,

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 Gerald Markowitz, Interdisciplinary Studies  
 Susan Opatow, Sociology  
 Jim Vrettos, Sociology  
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 Phil Yanos, Psychology  
 Demis Glasford, Psychology  
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